

The First 51
Barrel Racing Exercises
to Develop a Champion



**Arena-Side
Workbook**

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This is Your BONUS Companion to the 'The First 51' - Featuring Diagrams and Summarized Descriptions for Quick & Easy Access!

Good Answers Come From Good Questions – Your “How to Benefit” Checklist:

- Are the exercises performed in a way that educates my horse, while simultaneously improving his health & fitness?
- Am I pausing to visualize each exercise done with quality *first* in order to prepare my horse for success?
- Am I aware and willing to go back to basics, knowing it's the foundation all high-level maneuvers are built upon?
- Do I understand each individual horse's needs, and customize how I use repetition to help them learn?
- Am I a trainer that offers communication so consistent that my horses have complete confidence and trust in me?
- Do I watch video footage, not just of my runs but every-day riding, to constantly raise my awareness and improve?
- Have I empowered my horses with the education and health necessary to learn and perform with minimal stress?
- Am I realistic, flexible with timelines, and willing to adjust my goals to match my horse's readiness level?
- When faced with challenges, do I take responsibility for what I contribute to the partnership with my horse?
- Do I understand the difference between a problem and its symptoms, and focus on the parts to create a solution?
- Instead of molding and holding my horse's body into shape, do I use pressure & release to also educate his mind?
- When my horse doesn't understand, do I go back to what he does know, then adjust my approach and try again?
- Do I offer my horse a release when he does well, and have several ways to communicate when he's correct?
- Do I regularly put myself in uncomfortable learning situations and devote time to continued growth as a horseman?
- Am I committed to being “as gentle as possible but as firm as necessary” for effective and progressive training?

Additional Questions to Ask as You Execute and Troubleshoot:

- Does my horse maintain gait and direction?
- Is my horse's movement forward and energetic?
- Is my horse balanced laterally, or does he lean to the inside of a circle or turn?
- Is my horse balanced front to back, with adequate weight on the hindquarters?
- Is my horse calm, connected and responsive?
- Does my horse ever push into pressure, resist, or ignore my requests?
- Does my horse show signs of discomfort or irritability?
- Does my horse show signs of anxiety or tension?
- Does my horse need to build more coordination or strength?
- Am I looking where I want to go?
- Do I use my body (seat, legs, shoulders, weight, etc.) to direct my horse?
- Do I tend to overthink, or do I ride with feel and good timing?
- Am I leaning in the saddle, or am I completely balanced?
- Do I have an absolutely clear idea of what I want from my horse?
- Am I aware enough to notice the most subtle signs of a problem?
- Can I *really* sort out the cause of a problem versus the symptom?

Your Reflection

Exercise 1 – Be Coreageous

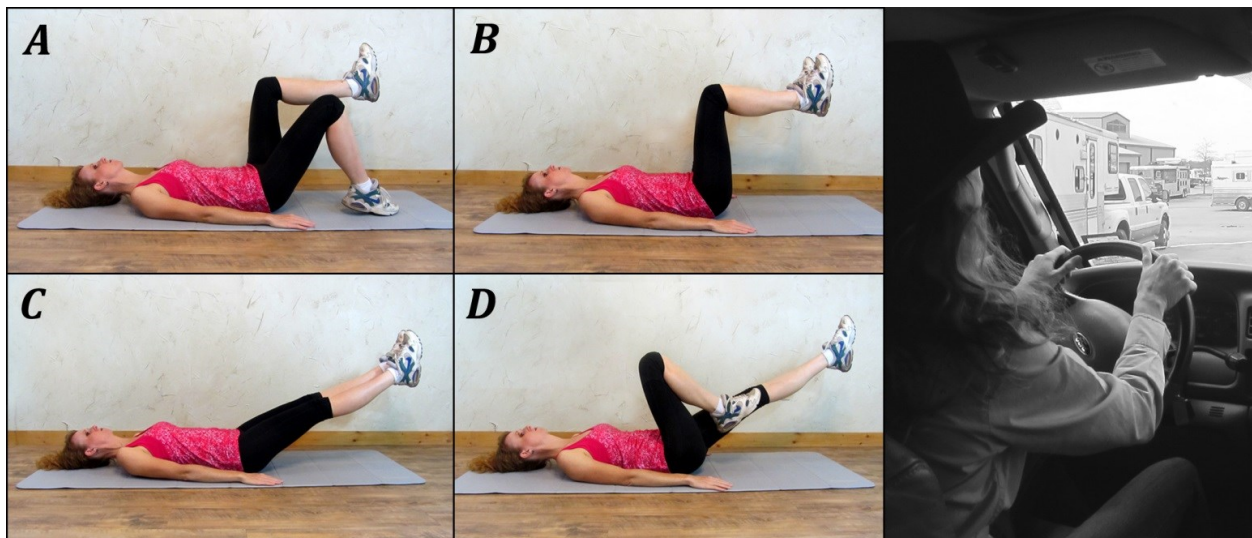
If there was ever an equestrian discipline that required stability in the saddle, barrel racing would be it! The primary job of the core muscles that wrap around our abdominal area and lower back is to help *support* movement and stay balanced *during* movement. Developing your core will not only help you stay secure in the saddle but it will improve your ability to ride faster & with more fluidity.

Alternate Leg Lifts – Start by lying flat on your back on a yoga mat. Bend your knees so that your feet are flat on the floor, shoulder width apart. To warm up the abdominals bring both feet up to a parallel position with your knees so that your upper leg is perpendicular to the floor and the lower leg is parallel to the floor. Alternate your right foot to the ground, tap for one second, then bring it back up to the starting position, then tap the left foot to the ground for one second, and back up. As you do, pull your navel back to your spine. Keep alternating as you count to ten, then rest for a moment with both feet on the floor. Shoot for three sets of ten reps. Be sure to focus on quality; keep your spine to the floor and your legs in good position (A).

Simultaneous Leg Lifts – Next, follow the exact same movements, but rather than alternate legs, lift and lower them together. Make quality, controlled movement your goal and remember to engage the core. Again perform three sets of ten reps (B). If you find this is too easy, extend your legs straight and slow down the movement instead, which is a good next step when you're ready (C).

Bicycle – For the third phase, raise both legs off the floor as in position C, and then bring your right knee toward your chest and extend the left leg straight out. Push through the heel and then bring the leg back and do the same on the opposite side in bicycle pedaling-type movement (D). The lower you hold your legs, the more challenging it will be. Finish with another three sets of ten reps.

Engage on the Go – To strengthen your core anytime (while sitting, driving, etc.), pull your belly button back toward your spine and then up, like you were zipping up a tight pair of jeans. Hold this position for one minute. As you gain strength, hold the position longer, up to ten minutes. Anytime you feel a lack of security in the saddle, engage your abdominals.





Exercise 2 – Pro Posture

Balance and symmetry in our bodies directly impacts that in our horses. With good posture in the saddle we make it easier for our horses to engage their hind end and elevate their shoulders, enabling them to perform with maximum athleticism. With better posture we improve our nervous system and organ function, increase circulation, and can reduce or prevent back pain and fatigue.

Backward Arm Rotations – Standing with arms stretched out to the side and palms up, rotate your arms in backward circles in whatever size feels like a good stretch. Focus on bringing your arms back to stretch the chest open and bring the shoulder blades together. Do three sets of fifteen rotations.

Palms Up Pullback – Stand with your palms up at approximately shoulder height with your upper arms near your side and elbows bent at a 45 degree angle. Bring your upward palms back to squeeze your shoulder blades together to the point of mild tension, then bring your palms in front of your chest and repeat. Repeat this movement for a total of three sets of ten. If you find this uncomfortable, hold your arms a bit lower. As you gain flexibility, raise them.

Exercise 3 – Super Balance

Better balance in the saddle leads to quicker *timing* – and thus quicker *times*. The best way to improve security in the saddle is to properly balance our bodies over our base of support and build strength in the soft tissues that support our frame which helps us maintain this balanced position.

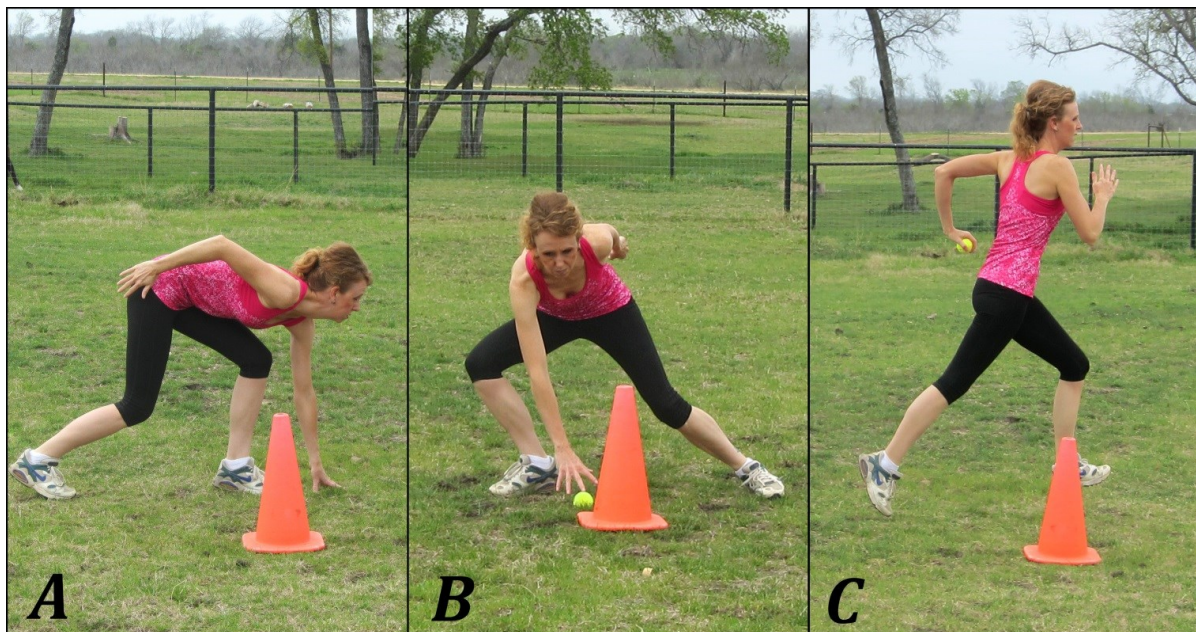
Romanian Lunges – Step forward into a lunge (A). Return to the standing position, then reach forward with both hands stretched straight out in the “superman” position as you lift one leg straight behind you. Make it your goal for your arms & legs to be perpendicular with the floor (B). Return your front foot to the floor and bring your hands back to your waist. Next, with the same foot, step backward and lower your hips into a reverse lunge, then keep your weight in your heels as you return to the “superman” position and repeat the lunge (C). Repeat this three-step series of movements ten times, then switch to the other leg. Do two sets of ten reps on each side.



Exercise 4 – Speed Racer

This drill is great for building quickness and agility as well as hand/eye coordination. Perform this exercise a couple times per week. Repeat until you feel you're no longer able to perform with the speed you started with. Since we're not building endurance, quality over quantity is key!

Shuttle Run Speed Drill – Set up three cones or soccer field markers in a straight line five yards apart. Set a tennis ball or another small object to the side of each end marker. Starting at the center marker, sprint to one end, pick up the ball, sprint to the opposite end, drop the first ball to pick up the other, then sprint back across the center line.



Exercise 5 – Ride as One

"Do something today that your future self will thank you for."

Circle without Stirrups – With two cones or markers positioned approximately 30 feet apart, saddle up and outfit your horse as usual. When your horse is properly warmed up, kick free of your stirrups and make an approximate ten foot diameter circle around one cone at a walk. Be aware of your posture. Feel your seat bones – does one seem to feel more grounded and secure, with the other lighter, almost floating? Just "go with the flow" and feel how your body naturally wants to position itself. Walk in a circle the other direction and feel it out as well. Take note of any differences. Next, trot a ten foot circle around one cone in one direction and then the other, first *only as an observer*. Transition up to an extended trot with smaller circles, noticing your body's tendencies. Once you've really taken note of your tendencies, you can then place your focus on doing the opposite. For example, if you tend to lean toward the inside, consciously balance your weight more evenly as you continue trotting stirrup-less circles. If you tend to lean forward more than usual without stirrups, consciously sit up straighter. By doing so, you're rewiring the neural pathways in your brain and creating new muscle memory for riding in a more balanced way without relying on the stirrups to brace in. The more balanced we train our bodies to be, the easier it will be for our horses to perform underneath us without restrictions caused by our unequal weight.

No Hands – Keep in mind that just because we’re holding the reins lightly, doesn’t mean we’re not relying on them or a certain hand position for balance. Sometimes our bodies become dependent on holding our hands in a specific way. Experiment with holding your hands and arms in a wide variety of positions (while still being able to safely guide your horse). Riding with a variety of hand positions helps reveal our individual tendencies and breaks the habit of being dependent on certain positions. Instead, it helps our bodies balance more independently on our horse.



Stretch it Out – (Ridden stability stretch from Exercise 3) To even further improve the stability of your seat and legs, when saddled and horseback, ensure your body is squared up and in proper alignment at the standstill. Then move your upper body forward to reach toward your horse’s ears while keeping your lower body stable. Next, move your upper body back to touch the top of your horse’s tail. Bend to the side to touch your boot with you hand as you bring your nose to your knee, while keeping your seat even in the saddle. Repeat each stretch five times.

“Athletes eat and train, they don’t ‘diet and exercise.’ How disciplined we are with our training is an indicator of how seriously we take our barrel racing. Many people claim ‘I don’t have time to work out,’ to that I say, ‘We don’t have time not to.’

We can choose to work out because we love our bodies (not hate them). Exercise is the opportunity to show gratitude and appreciation for what they allow us to do, what we want to continue to do - and do even better. It’s not punishment for what we eat, it’s rewarding ourselves with endorphins and strength. Exercise is just as much for the brain as the body - it elevates our mood, increases vitality, alertness and feelings of well-being. The body is built not only by how we move, but also the food we eat, the emotions we feel, and the thoughts we think. We must love ourselves and value our goals enough to live a healthy lifestyle, then follow up with positive habits that support those values.”

30 Day Barrel Racer *Fitness Challenge*

Implement the following exercises alone or in combination with any existing strength training, cardio + riding for the best results based on your fitness level.

1 <i>Coreageous</i>	2 Pro Posture + 20 Min. Cardio	3 Ride As One	4 Super Balance + 20 Min. Cardio	5 Speed Racer	6 Rest Day	7 Rest Day
8 <i>Coreageous</i> + 20 Min. Cardio	9 Pro Posture + Super Balance	10 Ride As One + 20 Min. Cardio	11 Speed Demon	12 <i>Coreageous</i> + 20 Min. Cardio	13 Rest Day	14 Rest Day
15 Pro Posture + Super Balance	16 Ride As One + 20 Min. Cardio	17 Speed Racer + <i>Coreageous</i>	18 Pro Posture + Super Balance	19 <i>Coreageous</i> + 20 Min. Cardio	20 Rest Day	21 Rest Day
22 Ride As One + 20 Min. Cardio	23 Speed Racer + <i>Coreageous</i>	24 Pro Posture Super Balance + 20 Min. Cardio	25 Ride As One <i>Coreageous</i> + 20 Min. Cardio	26 Speed Racer + Ride As One	27 Rest Day	28 Rest Day
29 Ride As One <i>Coreageous</i> + 20 Min. Cardio	30 Pro Posture Super Balance + 20 Min. Cardio					

**Always consult with your health care provider and a fitness consultant before beginning any exercise program.*

Laying the Groundwork



Exercise 6 – Yield to Pressure

Applying pressure with feel starts with *our intention* - the thoughts in our mind and the life/energy in our body. This allows a horse to better prepare for what's to come and respond more quickly and athletically. Communicating our intentions rather than going through the motions takes conscious and deliberate practice, but in time can become second nature. The more conscious and consistent we are, the lighter and responsive our horse becomes.

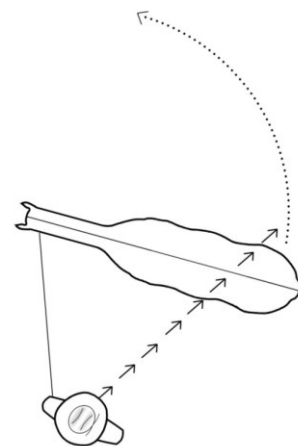
Imagine dividing a horse's body into five sections. Start by standing alongside your horse, facing his neck and shoulder area. Raise your energy and focus your gaze intently in the direction you want your horse to move. Next, apply soft but steady pressure with your fingertips with the intent for your horse to pivot his front end away. Do so in four stages of intensity, starting with feather light finger pressure all the way up to very firm if necessary. If this is new to your horse, and he is slow to respond, wait three to four seconds before increasing the firmness. If your horse still doesn't move, start the stages again and add driving pressure with one hand by rhythmically touching your horse with increasing firmness until they take a step. The instant this happens, release all pressure, rub your horse and expect him to stop. Pressure motivates & release teaches – the quicker you reward the correct response, the quicker a horse learns. Repeat in all five sections of your horse's body.

Exercise 7 – Disappearing Hindquarters

Hind quarter yields are not only a foundational movement for safety, but also advanced athletic maneuvers – which are important in the development of any horse, but especially a barrel horse.

Stand at the end of a 12 foot lead while facing the side of your horse's shoulder with your body and focus directed toward his hips. Choose a landmark off in the distance behind your horse's flank area so that you're standing in a position that would require you to walk "through" your horse's rear end to get to that point. As you focus on that point, lift your energy and walk toward it like you're on a mission. If your horse doesn't take note of you approaching his space, start twirling the end of your lead rope as a suggestion. It's

your horse's responsibility to move his body from your path. Once your horse has stepped aside, keep walking a few steps, requiring him to follow you. Reward your horse with a rest when he does well, then refocus on another object in the distance and repeat the exercise.





Exercise 8 – Follow the Leader

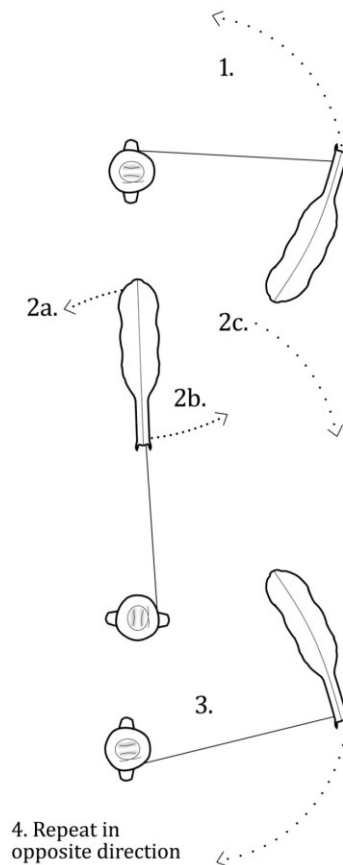
In this exercise, you'll ask your horse to travel further forward with his throatlatch at least at your shoulder, if not a bit further forward. The idea is that if you walk slowly, you'll expect your horse to walk slowly, if you jog, your horse jogs, if you quickly stop and back up, he should too, just as a foal would follow his mother.

With the intent to keep some slack in the line as your horse "follows a feel," focus forward, lift your energy and start walking briskly. If your

horse doesn't instantly follow, use a stick & string or tail of your lead rope to quickly flick toward his hind legs while still walking forward. Don't be discouraged if it's awkward at first or if your aim isn't so good. If he doesn't respond instantly, repeatedly flick the hind legs with increasing firmness until your horse takes a quick step forward to catch up. It's your horse's responsibility to keep slack in the line. When your horse does well, relax and offer some verbal encouragement or a rest.

Exercise 9 – Go, Disengage, Face & Go

This exercise prepares a horse to really utilize their hind pivot foot and transfer their weight to the hind end – all necessary for quality movement and efficient turns. Before it can be done in one smooth motion or at speed, it's important to develop the individual parts first. Take it slow, or break this exercise down into smaller segments if necessary. As you do, use a stick and string to serve as an effective extension of your hand for the best opportunity to develop good habits. Stand approximately 12 feet out from the wall of the arena or a solid fence. With your horse at your side, start with the lead rope in your left hand and stick in your right. Raise the energy in your body, look in the direction you want your horse to go (left) and then lift your left hand (and the lead rope) to signal to your horse you'd like him to depart on a circle to the left (1.). Once he does, lower your hand. Once he's close to making a quarter circle, turn toward your horse, focus your eyes like a laser at his hindquarters, lean toward them a bit to ask your horse to disengage and face you (2a.). If he doesn't, either use your right hand to run down the lead rope to encourage his front end to face you, or wave or slap your stick toward the hindquarters to further encourage them to yield. Repeat back and forth as shown.



Exercise 10 – Feeling Together

When it comes to communicating with feel, Ray Hunt said it best, *“You feel of your horse, you feel for your horse, then you both feel together.”* In order to feel “of, for, and together,” we (and our horses) must learn to recognize the difference between “feeling” and “pulling.” “Feeling together” while your horse circles on the ground is a great way to test and further develop connection. This exercise may even open your awareness to what *true feel* really is, help you become more conscious, *and* build your ability to be present and *ride with feel* as well.



“It’s the control of the feet through the mind that a person should be after. If you’ve missed that from the ground, why, you’ve missed the part that means the most to the horse. The person should be focused on getting the best possible connection with the horse on the ground – through feel – if they want to have those parts of the horse available to them when they ride.” – Bill Dorrance

To start, send your horse out on a circle on the end of at least a 12 foot line (lead rope) at a brisk walk. When he’s maintained at least one lap, turn and walk in the same direction at the end of the line so that you’re each walking on a circular path. If your horse doesn’t maintain gait alongside you, encourage him to continue walking forward along with you. Next, start slowly drawing the line or lead rope through your hand, one over the other, very consciously with feel. You’re essentially asking your horse to narrow down the circle and continue walking but come closer to you while



maintaining slight slack in the lead rope. You’re expecting him to “wear the feel” by maintaining a bit of slack, meaning that he is tuned in to you enough that a subtle change in the weight of the lead rope as well as the “drawing” or “sending” energy you offer has meaning to him. If your horse is resistant and meets you with tension in the line, you know that his response needs improvement or that his focus is elsewhere and not with you. Practice the preceding exercises if necessary while being mindful to reward your horse for connecting and responding.

After “reeling your horse in” and maintaining a walk with only a couple feet of line between you, change your focus and mentally “send” your horse back out while you slowly release the rope and encourage your horse to return to the larger circle. Use driving pressure with your stick to encourage your horse to move out & away if necessary. When your horse does well, stop for a rest.

Get Connected

Exercise 11 – A to B

The A to B exercise is simple in theory, but it's a revealing and powerful test and lesson in *responsibility* for horses and in *doing more with less* for riders. The goal is to ride on loose rein and direct your horse from point A to B only with your focus and very subtle body language. Start by choosing a point in the distance and line it up with a second point (like sighting a gun). **Next, pick up your reins slightly (without making contact) to signal a coming change, then bring up the life in your body. Squeeze lightly with your legs if necessary, and the instant your horse transitions to the walk, release any leg pressure.**



If your horse doesn't transition forward based off your energy and light leg pressure, use the end of your split rein, or an over & under to tap your leg first, then your horse if necessary. As you do this, you'll be using phases of pressure - first by lifting your reins and energy, then applying leg pressure, then tapping yourself lightly and/or your horse. Only go to the next stage if necessary, then relax a bit. This teaches your horse to respond to the subtlest cue and lets him know when he's correct.

Keep a "walk level" of energy in your body then place your rein hand on your horse's withers with intention to keep it resting there. Other than to block any excess forward motion, avoid the temptation to use your reins. If you must correct course, use your legs to get your horse's body back on track. The "aim" is to direct your horse perfectly straight with your focus and very minimal body language alone. This will really reveal whether your horse is responsible or if you're micromanaging. After stopping for a moment at your destination, refocus and start again. When your horse does consistently well, up the challenge by performing the exercise at faster gaits.

Exercise 12 – Measured Improvement

Transitions are simple but powerful. They require a horse to get balanced and shift weight to the hindquarters. The more transitions we ask for, the more time our horse's will spend in this position of "readiness" which helps to naturally increase their athleticism, power and quickness.

In the previous exercise, I explained steps for making an upward transition. **For a downward transition, I lift my rein (again, without making contact) to let my horse know a change is coming, then I lower my energy and exhale, sit deep in the saddle and only then make contact with my reins if necessary.** If you have to take it that far (making contact with the reins), do so, then back up twice as far as it took for your horse to stop. If you're consistent in the way you ask your horse to "go" and "whoa," soon they'll respond to the slightest suggestions, and you'll build better responsiveness. Practice performing transitions in gait while *consciously using these steps*. As you advance include transitions *within* gait (different speeds of walk, trot, lope, etc.), transitions in direction, and any combination of these! You can sandwich other maneuvers in the middle of your transitions to prevent your horse from making assumptions or transitioning mindlessly. For example, ask for a transition after trotting a long distance, to help maintain mental connection.

Exercise 13 – Hour Glass

it's time to build on the previous exercises with more changes of direction and even start adding changes in *body shape* into the mix! Set up two cones or barrels approx. 30 ft. apart. Ask your horse to circle one four feet from it starting at a walk. Use light pressure with the inside leg and subtle contact with the inside rein to ask your horse to curve his body in the same shape as the circle. Focus on where you're going as you ask your horse to maintain a steady, forward walk.

Slightly lead with your outside shoulder, which will put just a touch of bend through your torso. Your focus and body position is the first cue, your leg second, and then the rein only if necessary. When your horse is in good position, allow for a little slack in the reins and let up on the leg pressure, while keeping the correct position in your own body and a mental/visual focus on where you want to go.

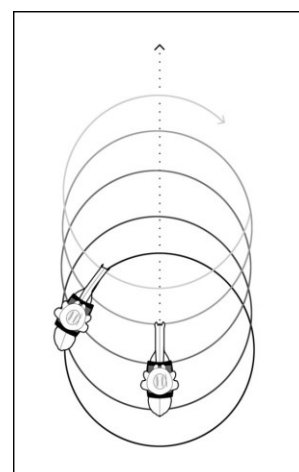


When you can circle one barrel or cone well, exit the circle and go in a straight line to the second barrel or cone to make a figure eight. Once your horse's hip clears the barrel, be sure he's truly straight. About six feet before the barrel or cone, sit deep in your saddle and (if necessary) lift the inside rein slightly to ask for a shift in weight to the hindquarters as well as slight lateral bend in your horse's body. Consider this your rate and shape point. If you have a finished horse, ask yourself – ***“How little can I do, and still have my horse step up and be responsible for maintaining gait, direction and even shape?”*** Do what you need to

make the less desirable thing *difficult*, the right thing *easy*. Instilling responsibility for these good habits means they are more likely to hold up under the intensity of speed in a run, requiring us to do less to get a response and ultimately be even faster.

Exercise 14 – Follow My Focus

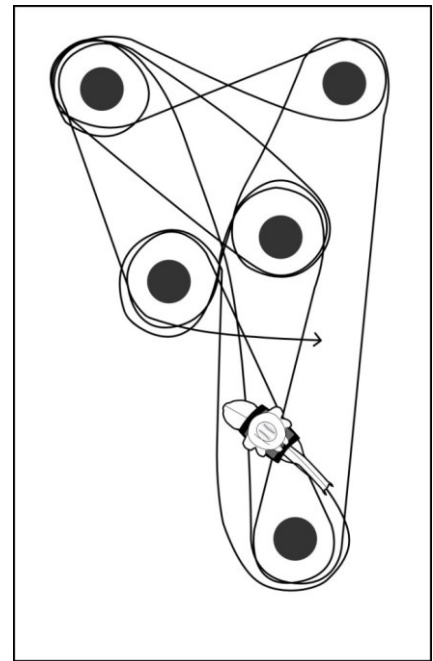
Have you ever wondered how barrel racing can really be called “chasing cans,” if they're stationary? We're going to include a *moving object* in this exercise, which should make the barrels seem easy! To execute it you'll need a friend's help. Start by having them walk from one end of the arena to the other in a straight line. Trot your horse in approximately a 20 foot circle around them as they walk forward. You now have a moving target that will require you to rate & calculate the size of the circle in order to keep it even and round. Initially it's likely that your circles will end up tight on one side, and long on another. You may have to transition to a lope to keep the circle even. When you have circled a couple times, stop, roll back and circle the other direction. To make it more challenging, have your friend jog or veer off path. When it's going well, move up to a lope.



Exercise 15 – Loopty Doo

This one is great for testing our horse's mental connection and avoiding assumption-making. The dynamic, quick succession builds strength and keeps their mind & feet busy!

Start by setting up at least five barrels in a random way ranging from 20 to 80 feet apart. The idea is to *not* have them perfectly placed at even distances. Ask your horse to trot around the barrels in a pattern that you make up as you go along, while allowing just enough time and space to set your horse up with good form. Make random "loopy doo's" around the barrels to the inside, around the outside and weave between them. When everything goes really well, step up to a lope. Break down to a trot for a stride to perform simple lead changes if necessary. Although you'll be making up the pattern as you go, be sure to think far enough ahead so that you go to each barrel with assurance in mind.



As you do, ask the following questions...

1. Does my horse maintain an even, consistent, forward gait?
2. Is my horse's weight balanced front to back and side to side?
3. At what point does my horse seem to want to prepare for the turn?
4. Is my horse round in his body through the turns and light in my hands?
5. Does my horse follow my focus and maintain straightness between barrels?
6. Am I communicating exactly where and how I want my horse to go with my focus & energy?
7. Do I sit deep and adjust the posture in my body before the turns, to help my horse do the same?



My "equine soul mate" is **Marked and Honored**, aka *Pistol*. Pistol is by PC Frenchmans Mark - a full brother to Bozo & PC Frenchmans Hayday, and out of a daughter of Jet of Honor. Pistol's been with me since he was two. I futuritized him as a five year old and we've competed in AQHA shows, packed flags, ridden in parades & performed bridleless. Pistol is well-rounded but our main focus continues to be barrel racing. He's in his teens now, but I believe the best is yet to come!

"In my book, it's virtually impossible to have a horse "too broke," because they will tend to become less so at speed. A horse that seems too responsive most likely needs more differentiation between what type of cues are meaningful and which are meaningless. It's also possible for a horse to actually be reactive, and there is a big difference. A horse that lightly and quickly responds to the rider appropriately and consistently, even at speed, is really a barrel racers dream come true. Some horses are more sensitive by nature, but maintaining responsiveness in our horses is something we instill, develop, and requires regular, consistent attention and effort on our part." – Heather Smith

Body Control

Exercise 16 – Flexion in Motion

Problems on the pattern can always be traced back to shaky fundamentals that are either physical, mental (educational) and emotional in nature, or a combination thereof. I don't feel as though barrel racing requires good basics, but *excellent basics*. Proper body control includes the ability to pick up the reins and have our horse flex at the poll and soften to our contact. Lateral flexion through the neck is one of the first & most important lessons a young horse learns. No matter a horse's age, I encourage revisiting this aspect of their foundation often.



From the saddle, run your hand down one rein and then focus on slowly closing your fingers on the rein as you bring your hand toward your belly button. Hold the reins with mindfulness and feel. The goal is for your horse to be light as air and soft as butter, with no resistance. If you have that to start with, hold your hand for a couple seconds, then release on softness. Take these steps to teach lateral flexion on both sides, then ask for your horse to hold soft lateral flexion with some slack in the line for a few seconds. Then work your way up to a minute or more. When you have this at a standstill, ask for it at a brisk, forward walk. Start with a couple seconds and work your way up to maintaining this lateral neck flexion longer while in motion. Once you have solid lateral flexion, use the same concepts and steps with two hands to ask for vertical flexion of the poll without motion, then with it.

Exercise 17 – Separate & Combine

If your horse already understands how to yield his body sideways both directions, pivot his front end around 360 degrees and his hind end around the front end 360 degrees, it's time to separate & combine! Start by asking your horse to yield his shoulders, ribs or hips at a walk. Move them in and out on a straight line. When everything is very free, mobile and responsive at a walk, advance to moving these body parts around at a trot in a straight line. Eventually advance to yields in & out of a large circle, then more challenging smaller circles. As you progress, move up to a lope. Keep in mind that even if you don't necessarily use leg cues in a run, that any kind of quick response you ask for and receive without resistance will help prepare your horse to respond over-all, even to rein pressure, when you need it most. After all - *how our horses do some things is how they do other things!*



Pivot on the forehand.



Hip In & Outs



Pivot on the hindquarters.

Exercise 18 – Lovely Laterals

Once we can quickly and easily influence our horse's body parts individually, it's time to start asking them to yield in an even greater variety of ways while adding more motion to the mix. Barrel racing is a unique sport in that it requires a horse's body to be shaped in a very subtle arc through the turns, while staying collected, and maintaining strong forward motion. It's a lot to ask from a horse, so it's no surprise that we run into difficulty with putting this all together. It wouldn't seem logical that lateral work, which is any movement where direction of travel is at least in part sideways, would be particularly valuable to barrel racers. However, even if lateral movement in a barrel run is minimal, there are great benefits to gain from incorporating it into our program.



Counter Arc – This staple can be performed by asking for brisk forward motion on a large circle, then lightly picking up an inside rein, let's say left, then adding inside leg pressure at the cinch as you focus forward on the circle, but send your energy to the right to yield out and away from the circle. The concept is to have the horse's body arced to the left but be moving forward and sideways to the right. If necessary, use your outside leg near the back cinch to even further encourage the full-body bend.

Two Track - The meaning of *two tracking* is to create two diagonal lines of hoof tracks in the ground – one track for the front legs and one for the hind with your horse's body perfectly straight (more challenging than it sounds!). Set up four cones to create a 50 foot square with the goal of two tracking across the diagonal from one corner to the other with *zero bend* in your horses body!

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Exercise 19 – The New Corkscrew

Spiraling down from a large circle to a barrel size turn seems easy enough. The more challenging aspect is recognizing and creating *quality movement* as you do! Start by making a 50 foot diameter circle around one barrel and then gradually spiraling down to a barrel sized turn over the course of approximately four to six circles. Although we haven't even reached the **Quality Movement** chapter yet, this is something we definitely need to be mindful of throughout the entire development process. One of the first, most important aspects of quality movement is that it must be forward and reaching. Calmness and relaxation is first priority, but we want the stride to be ground covering and dynamic. To encourage this, raise the energy in your body, use your seat to motivate your horse, and if necessary tap your horse on the rear with a split rein or over & under to remind him if necessary that those subtle signals from your body have meaning. If your horse tends to have a tense, short and choppy stride, focus more on achieving relaxation first. In this case, lower your energy a bit and think "*calm, low and forward.*"



Exercise 20 – Simple Changes

To prime yourself for this exercise, warm up with some more lateral work! Start with some simple sideways movement at a standstill, then ask your horse to quickly transition and go sideways in the other direction. His footfall should be quick and snappy as he reaches under with his hind leg, across with the front leg, and keeps his body straight with little to no rein contact. We want our horse responsive to our leg, but not reactive. If they assume leg pressure always means “go,” our legs won’t have much value for communication.



To cue for a left lead lope departure, put a little more of your weight on the opposite (right) seat bone and stirrup, which is essentially where the lope departure generates from. Wherever you put a little more weight, the horse will become more likely to step under himself to balance that weight. Transferring your own weight back also “opens up the door,” lifting weight off what will be the leading leg, allowing the diagonal transfer of energy to come through. First pick up your reins to signal a coming change while making very light, lifting contact with your horse’s mouth on the side of the lope departure to help elevate that side even further. It’s ideal to learn to feel when that outside hind leg steps forward, and in the split second before it does, apply leg pressure at the back cinch to cue it to come forward in the lope departure while also lifting your energy to suggest your horse transition upward in gait. The application of leg pressure should cause your horse to yield his hip very slightly in the direction of the lope departure. His shoulders will be elevated and his nose slightly tipped in the direction you’re going as he steps into a smooth, easy lope departure. Repeat!

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BECOME A LEAD CHANGE LEGEND!

Did you know?

There’s a [video post](#) at [BarrelRacingTips.com](#) to help you master the departure to the first barrel and ensure you can *always* pick up the correct lead? Another [video post](#) covers the topic of *flying lead changes*. Although training a horse to perform FLYING changes isn’t necessary to train a barrel horse (SIMPLE ones *are*, but horses will tend to switch leads on their own at speed in a run), *nothing compares* to **the benefits** you & your horse will gain from doing so. Search for “[lead changes](#)” at [BarrelRacingTips.com](#) to dramatically improve your timing, feel & effectiveness!!

“If something doesn’t feel quite right, always go back to the fundamentals. Think of it this way - if you set out to paint a picture, as long as you start with the three basic primary colors, you can mix them to create anything you want. It’s no different with horses. If you’re lacking one of the primary fundamentals, you’ll always be limited and the picture won’t be nearly as pretty (or fast). Do you have quick response to leg cues? Is your horse’s weight balanced? Is he relaxed? Failure to execute a lead change is only a symptom of one or more missing fundamentals.” – Heather Smith

Quality Movement

Exercise 21 – Balance is Power

To begin, again randomly place cones or markers throughout the arena, then start by asking your horse for a brisk, forward, reaching trot. Focus your gaze on an object in the distance and this time be especially aware of the straight, balanced posture of *your own body*. Get *very present* in your body, and feel the alignment from nose to tail in your horse. Even try closing your eyes for a few steps.

Does any of part of your horse's body seem out of alignment? If you're not sure, glance down – are any of the body parts bulging or tipped in or out? It's not uncommon for a horse to get out of alignment as they drift toward a gate or somewhere else they'd rather be. Challenge yourself to be aware of the most subtle changes in your horse's body. Any misalignment is likely to be more obvious at a trot which is a two beat gait that doesn't shift your horse's body one way or the other.



Horse's nose and neck is tipped to the side.

"The cost of awareness is responsibility." Once you're aware of the ways in which you or your horse leans forward or side to side, you'll be empowered to create more balance, & therefore more power!

Exercise 22 – Perfect Circles

We'll never know how flawless and fast our runs could be until we perfect the most elementary element – our CIRCLES! Here's a powerful checklist for doing just that:

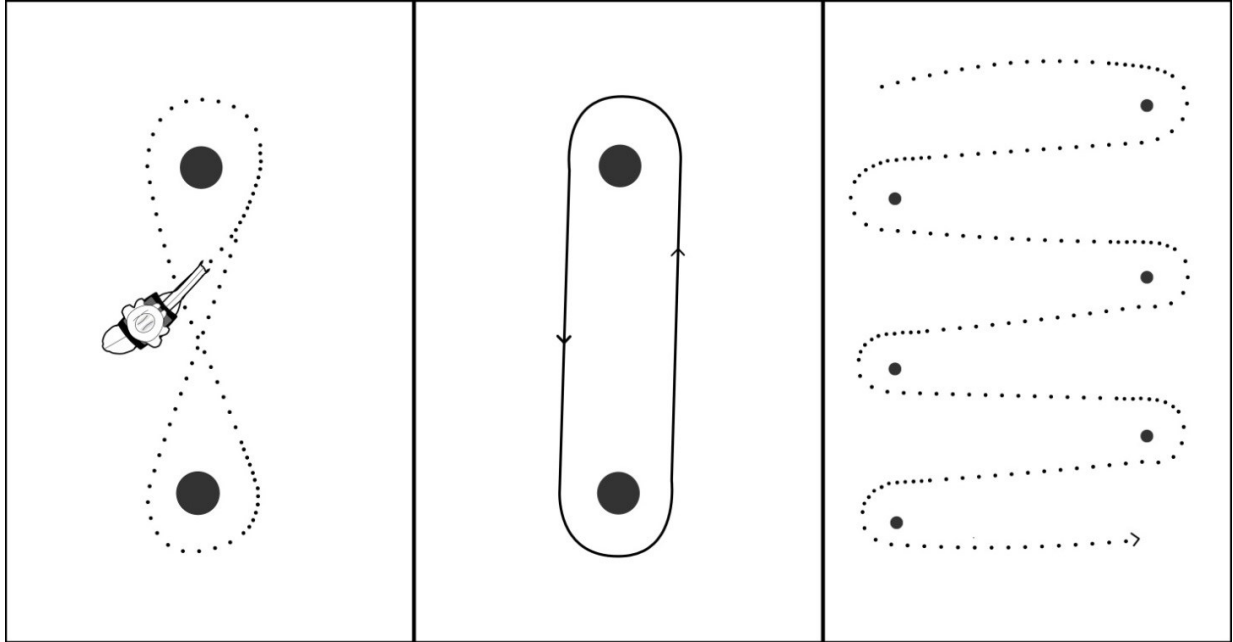
- ✓ **Connection** – I've met my horse's greatest need by providing quality leadership. He's calm, connected and responsive.
- ✓ **Freedom** – I'm not bracing or leaning to one side or the other. I can trot a small circle without stirrups and my upper body easily remains in good balanced position. I know my saddle fits well and is not inhibiting my horse's movement.
- ✓ **Impulsion** – My horse's stride is not short or choppy, and it's not slow and lethargic; he willingly and evenly moves around a barrel in a dynamic way with balance and forward reach.
- ✓ **Precision** – When circling, I use subtle body language to suggest to my horse that he stay on that circle and between my reins and legs. I can make corrections and adjustments effectively and quickly without resistance.
- ✓ **Flexion** – My horse is not only educated to shape his body in an arc around a barrel, but will maintain a slight arc based on my very subtle guidance and body language without having to be "held" in position.
- ✓ **Collection** – My horse will shift his weight to the hind quarters, while moving forward with energy. He will lift his back and I can ask him to extend or collect his stride.
- ✓ **Independence** – My horse is confident and understands his responsibilities. I trust him and don't have to micromanage. If he makes a mistake, he's willing to accept my guidance without delays.



"It's better to be slow and correct than fast and wrong, but slow and correct doesn't mean dull, lethargic movement with excess weight on the front end." – Heather Smith

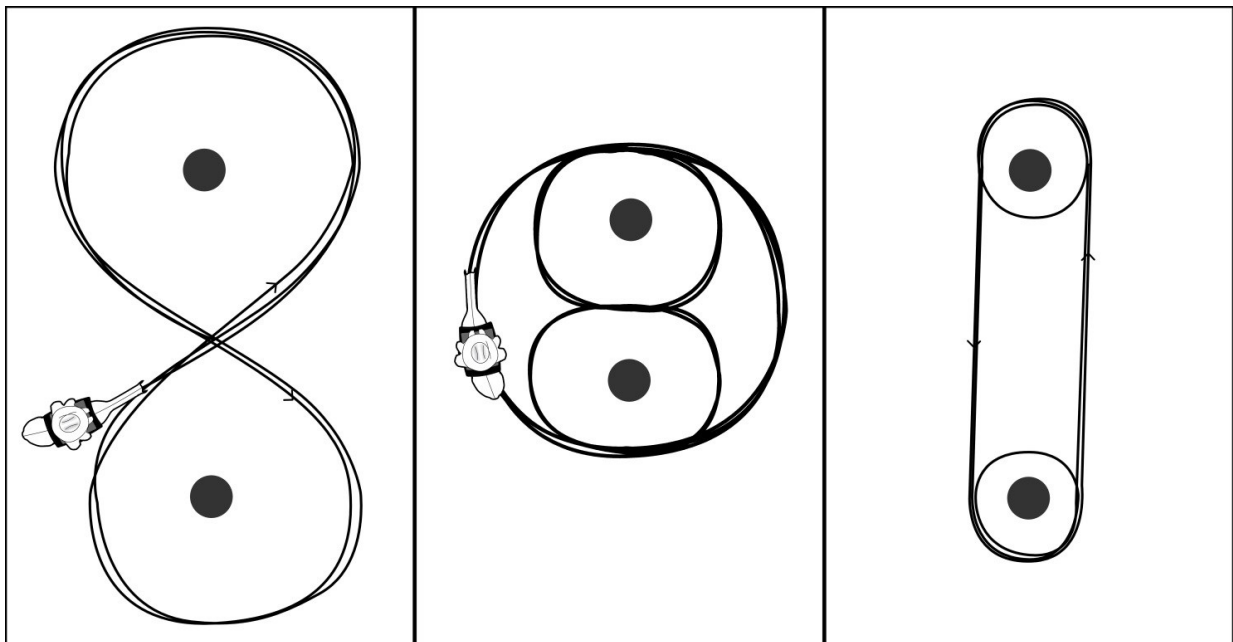
Exercise 23 – Arc to Straight

Here are more opportunities to practice & refine your transitions in gait, as well as transitions *within gait*, but especially transitions in your horse's *body shape* and the *balance* of his weight (*and yours*).



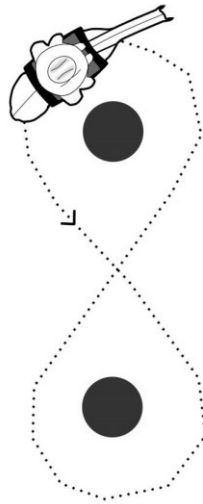
Exercise 24 – Circle to Straight

For even greater refinement of our circles, there are three qualities from the *Perfect Circles* prerequisites (Exercise 22 on page 19) that require more specific attention. As you execute the Circle to Straight exercises below, place an *even greater* focus on **Impulsion**, **Flexion** and **Collection**.



Exercise 25 – Back Arouds

A horse can't back up without transferring more weight to the hind end. The saying that *"the better a horse backs up, the better they do everything else"* is certainly true. This is because the more a horse backs up, the more they will tend to weight their hindquarters in general, helping them be more prepared for *any* athletic maneuver. Backing figure eights around two barrels will help create more of the front to back body-balance we need in a run.

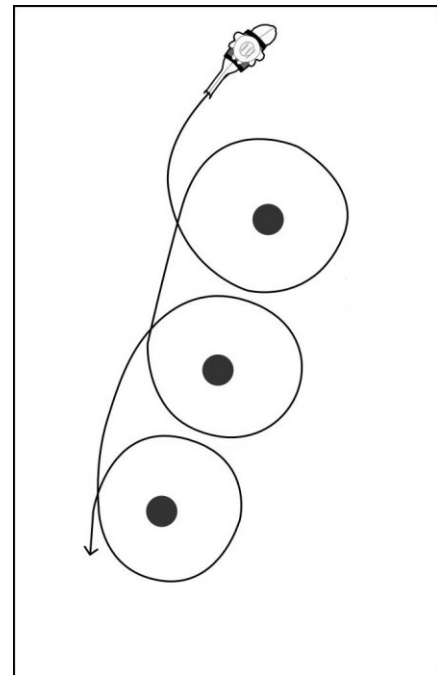


Strength & Coordination

Exercise 26 – Straight Loops

Start by loping large loops around the barrels either all to the right, or all to the left. Continue with them in this formation for four to seven sessions before placing them in a straight line. Staggering the barrels helps a horse create a habit of keeping his shoulder elevated due to the slight uphill difference in the angle of the approach to the barrel. Only lope small, barrel size circles, and turn up the speed when you're confident your horse is ready. The more gradually we ask them for more, and the more particular we are about quality in the process, the more likely they will hang on to all the positive habits we've worked to develop.

If your horse seems to lack motivation, positioning the barrels further apart will require them to lengthen and free up due to the greater distance in between turns. For a horse with an overabundance of "go," bring the barrels closer together to approximately 20 feet. The repetitive small circles will help balance this type of horse mentally and emotionally and help him maintain an even gait.



"There are two foundational ways to build speed – to get stronger or get better at expressing strength. Another way to put it, is that to build strength is to put more force behind the movement; to improve coordination is to improve the ability to coordinate and carry out the movement. Every horse will tend to lean a little toward one extreme or the other, but until we have the right combination of both strength and coordination, their athleticism (and speed) will never be fully expressed... Although genetics is another factor, the good news is that their development (which we have complete control over) plays a huge part." – Heather Smith

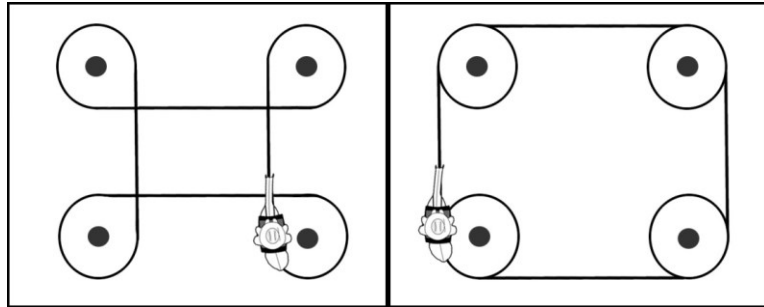
Exercise 27 – Four x Four

The key to making the *Four x Four* exercise valuable is in *the way* your horse moves around the barrels. This is an area where many horses tend to get a little lazy and lean on the front end or to the inside. It's hard work for a horse to perform this pattern, but don't allow fatigue to affect the quality. Loping around the pattern *once with quality* is better than *ten times without it*.

Pay very close attention to your own body position. Be aware of how your weight is positioned in the saddle and keep your chin and eyes up and looking forward. Elevate your hands a little higher than normal. If your horse feels lazy, bring up your own energy. Encourage your horse to connect and respond to your body. If he doesn't, follow up with a reminder to reinforce what you've asked for.

The movement of your horse should feel "big," forward and elevated without extreme leaning. Circle each barrel as many times as necessary until you feel an improvement, then either stop and reward your horse with a rest or move on to the next barrel.

Over time as your horse is loping to the inside in one direction, then the other, and doing so with quality and fluidity, feel free to start circling to the outside and adding speed - increasing and decreasing based on the life in your body.



Exercise 28 – Roll Back & Around



Performing roll backs by loping an approximately 35 foot diameter circle next to the fence and approaching it at a 45 degree angle, gives the horse just enough motivation to start the rollback correctly, as well as an open door of space to encourage forward movement once they have rolled around.

As you're approaching the stopping point, really feel the rhythm of your horse's lope. You'll notice that it feels like your seat moves in a series of circular movements. With every "*ba-da-damp*" there is a low point and a high point. The high point is the fraction of a second when it's ideal to ask for a stop just before the other hind leg comes forward. When you time this just right, and your horse responds instantly, you set him up for the hind legs to come sliding underneath in a good, balanced position.

To ask your horse for the rollback, pick up the reins to signal a coming change and sit deep in the saddle as you exhale and lower your energy. With your own weight on your outside hip, turn your eyes, then torso and then hips slightly toward the wall to suggest your horse make a dynamic move over his hocks and out of the stop. Resist the temptation to hustle your horse by leaning forward. Instead raise your energy and, if necessary, tap your rein or over & under on your leg or your horse's hip or shoulder to reinforce your message and provide additional motivation. When you use your front end to hustle your horse's rear end, you "close the door" for powerful movement to come through. Educate your horse & allow him to carry you.

"Champions are brilliant at the basics."
- John Wooden

Exercise 29 – Gather Round

When teaching collection, keep in mind the many prerequisites (see points 1-5 in the Perfect Circles Checklist in **Exercise 22** on page 19). These foundational qualities are *necessary* in order for **physical, mental** and **emotional collection** to be a possibility.

To develop it, start by lightening up your seat to create space for your horse's back to rise up in. Engage your own stomach muscles and slightly round your lower back to inspire your horse to do the same. Bring up your own body's energy as an invitation to the horse to mirror that energy. Encourage your horse to elevate and lift the front end by opening and elevating your own shoulders and looking up and forward. Rather than bump or pull, keep a stable but soft and slightly giving feel on the reins. Think of your hands as helping to frame the horse, without restraining him. Remember, the goal with collection is eventually self-carriage; if the horse doesn't take responsibility for this, transition down in gait and invite him again. Once you feel just a few good strides, reward your horse. If your efforts don't seem to be fruitful, consider the prerequisites and brush them up individually before following these steps to give it another go (*isolate, separate & recombine*)!

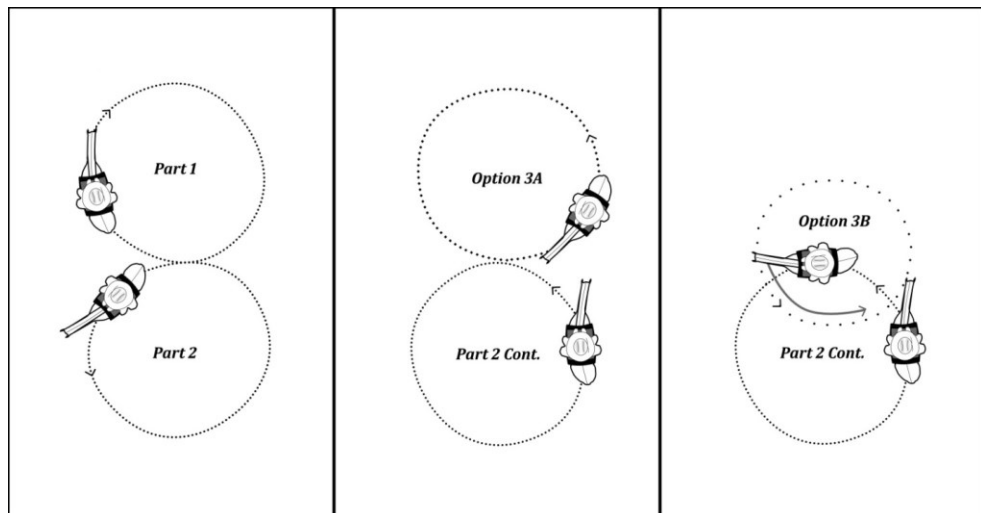


Exercise 30 – Tumble Weed

The *Tumble Weed* helps a horse learn to *maintain rhythm* and *flow* through transitions in **weight** and **body shape**. Start by asking your horse to shape his body and walk on a 12 – 15 foot circle. When you've made one circle, ask him to move laterally out and away in a counter arc with his body in *the same shape* as he started in, but with the feet traveling on a similarly sized circular path in the opposite direction like a figure eight (Part 1 & 2). Continue in a counter arc until you complete a full "counter circle," then pick up the reins just a bit and sit deep as you exhale and lower your energy.

You'll then move into **one of two options**. The first, and easiest (A), is to ask your horse to rock into a dynamic curved backwards circle with his body in the same shape. Another option (B), is to rock into a smaller, tighter turn around. The goal is to exaggerate the weight shift to the hindquarters.

When you feel swift, quality, balanced movement, walk forward a few steps to give your horse a break, then start over. Feel for him using his hindquarters well and reward that. Soon it will be a nice, flowing rhythmic picture!



Perfect Patterns

Exercise 31 – Weave & Leave

If we want to be successful running barrels, it's important for our horses to be partners, not puppets. It's in our best interest and theirs to empower them to *use their brains*. However, they won't tend to do this well, unless it's regularly exercised! The weave pattern is a great way to do so.

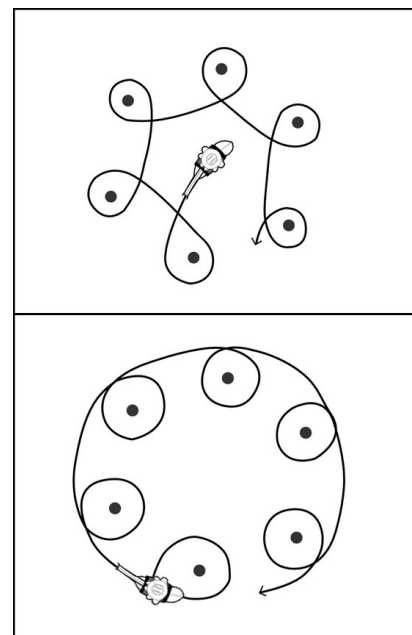
I prefer to use a subtle amount of inside leg to yield the ribs away as I round each obstacle, then switch leg and my body shape just before I get to the center between them. This allows my horse a split second to prepare for the transition in his body shape that must occur, and also makes the weave pattern an excellent one for improving rider timing and precision. Do as much as necessary but as little as possible. You can always be testing your horse and putting him on his honor to see "how little it takes" from your reins and legs. Keep repeating the weave pattern until your horse starts to show signs that he's mentally engaged and taking some responsibility for the pattern.



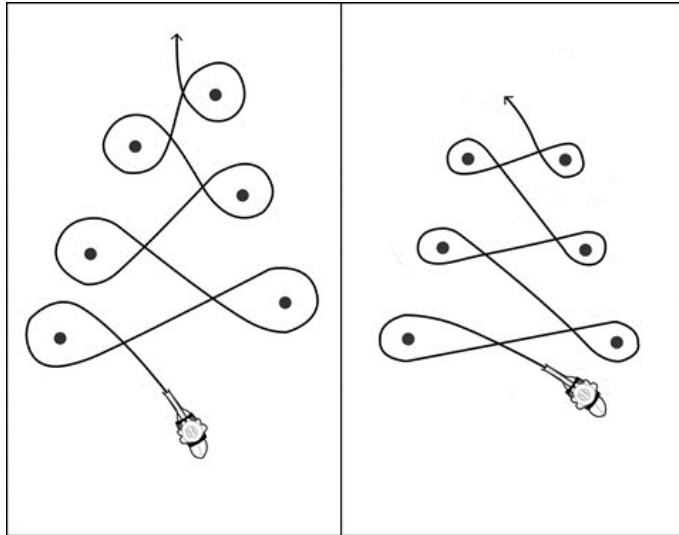
Exercise 32 – Stop the Clock

To begin, trot your horse around to the inside of the barrels with positioning that simulates what you would ask for on the actual barrel pattern. For me, this means I'll be approximately four feet away from the barrel at the start of the turn, five feet behind the barrel, and three feet away from the barrel as I exit. Really focus on quality movement and precise footfall. With so much repetition in this exercise, it's critical that you and your horse both stay mentally and physically engaged.

As your horse starts to learn the pattern, move up to a lope, being conscious of the quality of that lope – be sure it's big and forward while keeping the correct form and distance around the barrels. To increase the challenge, lope around the outside rather than the inside. This is more physically exerting, so it's wise to give your horse a rest when he needs it and lope another set when your horse is not extremely tired. This exercise will really enhance what you already have going well, as well as bring to light whatever aspects may need improvement.



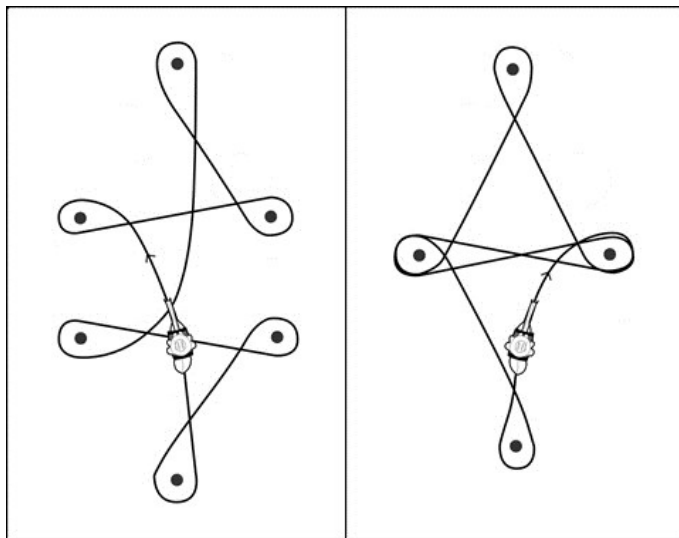
Exercise 33 – X-Mas Tree



It's important to perform these patterns with the same focus & precision as you would on the barrel pattern. You know what they say about "perfect practice" right!? Pay close attention to your timing & body language – do you know exactly where you want to sit deep in the saddle to cue your horse to prepare for the turn? Also be careful that you stay seated as you guide your horse out of the turn by helping him generate power in *his* hindquarters with *your* hindquarters – in other words, raise your energy but don't get up, out & over the saddle too soon, or *pull* your horse around the turn. Teach him to power through with a subtle guiding hand.

Be prepared to realize that this IS a challenging exercise that will reveal you and your horse's weak areas. Rather than get discouraged, get excited for your new found awareness!

Exercise 34 – Double Pattern

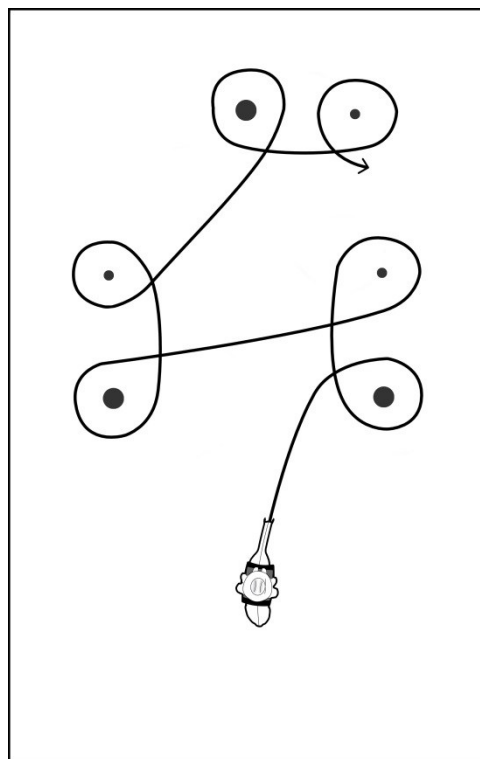


One of the greatest benefits of the Double Pattern is that it makes your starting and stopping point less exaggerated. This, combined with the similarity to the *actual* pattern with the opportunity for smooth, fluid, stress-free repetition, makes it a great one for tuning and problem solving. Think about how you can use this opportunity to improve aspects of your own timing and body position in a run. You can use six barrels, forming two triangles with their base approximately 20 feet apart, or just add one more barrel opposite of the third barrel to create a diamond shape.

"If your horse tends to lock on to patterns too much, anticipates the turns or ever becomes unresponsive, feel free to mix things up by asking for a varying degree of speed between the barrels. Just because a pattern has barrels and is often done at speed, doesn't mean your horse should assume that all patterns with barrels are all done at speed. Keep your horse connected to you and use the life and energy in your body to communicate how you want him to move by relaxing and slowing down your energy when you want a slower pace. This will benefit you greatly in the alley especially. The alley is a place where the horse should not assume when it's time to go, but stay connected and willing to wait for and accept your guidance." – Heather Smith

Exercise 35 – Tight Ends

Patterns have the power to build our horse's responsibility and confidence, but they *also* have the potential to be our worst enemy. **Horses learn what we teach them**, which isn't always necessarily what we *want them to learn*. It's ideal for our horses to take responsibility for staying precisely on path, and do so with the greatest amount of speed possible. However, if our horse has been misguided and picked up some undesirable habits, then we may need to take measures to help loosen up this undesirable attachment. If a horse is an overachiever he may anticipate and overwork, and in the process not finish his turns due to mentally locking onto the next turn too soon, resulting in a wide exit. This exercise is great for a horse that doesn't finish the turns well. Regardless of what the reason is – whether the horse simply isn't taking responsibility, is making assumptions and getting ahead of himself, or whether other factors are involved, *Tight Ends* has the power to sharpen up the exit from the turns in any horse. It's a great way to reestablish connection, keep a horse's aggressive nature balanced out, and ensure you're taking the straightest, fastest path between the barrels.



Problem Solving

Exercise 36 – Get on Track

"What gets rewarded, gets repeated." Our horses will be more motivated to Get on Track and be responsible for proper position on the pattern when they regularly experience *comfort* for doing so. By taking these steps all the way up to a lope and beyond, first on *a* pattern, then on *the* barrel pattern, you're teaching your horse to crave it, and that it's THE best place to be.

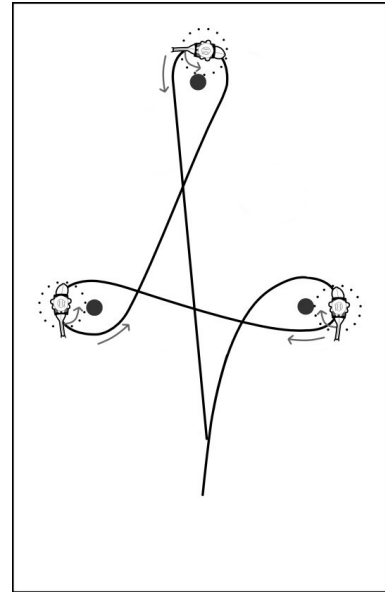


Start on any pattern by strongly focusing on where you're going, with your body positioned appropriately. Make it obvious where you want your horse to go by weighting your stirrups and leading with your outside shoulder in the turns to create some bend in your own torso. Expect your horse to stay on track and if he veers off, use your legs to move whatever body part is out of alignment to get back on track and only lift the reins to block any excess forward movement. Use your hands as little as possible, and don't worry about perfect body shape. The purpose is to establish responsibility for foot placement. Everything else will come together more easily once you have it. The "sweet spot" is *the pattern*. Don't be afraid to be quick and firm in your correction – which creates motivation to seek comfort. Be clear with your focus and body language, but don't prevent your horse from going off path. Let him commit to a mistake, then make a well-timed correction to get back on path, then reward him by allowing him to continue on the pattern.

Exercise 37 – Spin to Win

This exercise involves asking your horse to perform a spin on the back side of the barrel. It can be done at any point on the pattern where your horse needs to better utilize his hindquarters. In order for it to be effective, you should already be able to perform a quality spin at moderate speed. If your horse isn't responsive, educated and using himself well enough to perform a correct spin, then develop and improve that first, which may play a big part in resolving the original problem on the pattern.

Turning into the barrel is best in the middle of the turn and helps prevent a horse from developing a habit of fading out and away from the barrel. If your horse really dives into a turn with the front end, stop and perform a spin to the outside instead. After four sessions, cruise through the pattern to test your work and make any adjustments.



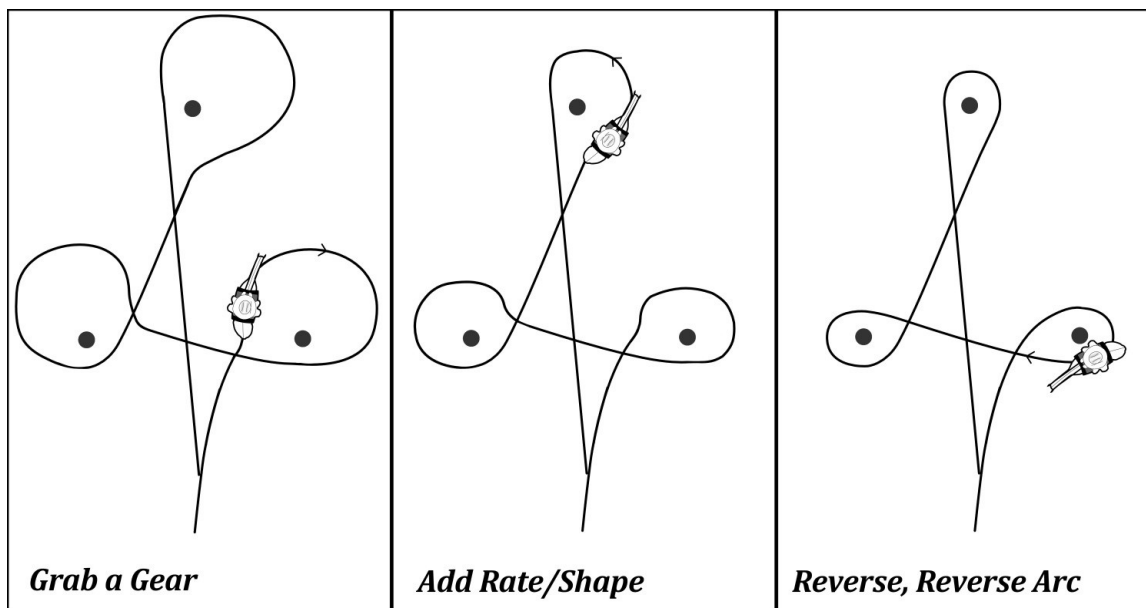
Exercise 38 – Close the Gap

The goal with *Close the Gap* is to recognize what needs improvement, then think laterally about how you can utilize certain maneuvers, conditions, environments, ways of moving, etc. as if to say "Hey, this applies (or doesn't apply) here too." By doing so, you're getting your horse more connected naturally by using psychology to correct assumption making, replacing negative associations with positive ones, and making it your horse's idea to do the right thing.

- If your horse is relaxed out on a trail ride, but has anxiety around barrels, set your pattern up in the pasture and work them there, as footing allows. In the arena, focus on relaxation.
- If your horse has a negative association with the barrels themselves, set up barrels any and everywhere and use the A to B exercise to go from one to the next for a five minute rest.
- Set up a few random barrels spaced as far apart as possible in the arena, then really ask your horse to stretch out between them to realize he also needs to do so on the actual pattern.
- To ask for more speed without having to flog your horse with your legs or an over & under in a run, create an association with a voice cue, by making a specific sound, then asking for a sprint.
- Think of any maneuver your horse does well away from the pattern such as spins, rollbacks, backing, etc. and incorporate these moves into your exercises.
- Do some exhibitions at a walk to let your horse know you won't always be entering the arena at speed, which causes a horse to think and check in with you rather than make assumptions.
- If your horse is slow in the turns, work on hustling him around randomly placed individual barrels to create natural momentum without having to add pressure on the pattern itself.
- If your horse associates an increase in speed with an increase in emotions, add speed then go back to something slow until you have complete relaxation, then introduce speed again. Keep repeating, going back and forth, over and over to "close the gap."
- If your horse is drawn to the gate, the trailer or other horses, break the assumption that "I get to rest and be comfortable here," by really hustling their feet and putting them to work in that spot, and provide more comfort in a place that is different/opposite of where they are drawn to.

Exercise 39 – Counter Arc

It's not what we do, *but how we do it!* The Counter Arc can serve many purposes on the pattern.



Exercise 40 – Down the Alley - Three Components for Resolving Gate Problems

Physical – At the first sign of a problem, even if your horse only hesitates for a second or takes just two steps backward, the first thing to do is put competing on hold and make plans to see a qualified Vet. to rule out or address a physical problem. This might mean hauling eight hours to your nearest teaching hospital and paying in the four figure range for a thorough exam. It might mean getting a second opinion. It might mean treating your horse for ulcers, upping their joint support, having therapeutic body work done, or all of these things. When a gate issue comes up, don't "wait and see," but develop a "leave no stone left unturned" approach as you set out to resolve the problem.

Mental – One of the most common causes of gate problems is that the horse simply isn't trained well enough. If your horse won't enter the gate, this means they aren't willing to stay "between your reins and legs." In other words, there are limitations to where (and when) they will go for you. Any time there is just a sliver of resistance, whether they don't follow slack in the lead rope, or hesitate just a split second to get in the trailer – these are symptoms of the same problem. When I ask a horse to go forward, turn or stop, and he can't or won't, there's simply a missing foundational element. The answer to every suggestion I make is always to "follow a feel," and I expect my horses to do so without resistance. If they don't, then I have failed to educate them and meet their needs.

Emotional – Any time a horse becomes extremely oppositional, get curious about why. In some cases a horse may have a well-developed education, but a gate problem might have more to do with *how the horse feels*. It's not hard for a rider to get a horse to do what they want through fear and intimidation, and some people even confuse this with leadership. Great leaders are firm at times no doubt, but true horsemen inspire horses to do what they want based on genuine desire instead of fear of what might happen if they don't. As you go through the Emotional Fitness chapter, you'll gain insights and clarity on why horses develop anxiety about running barrels, and how you can empower even sensitive, hot barrel horses to manage their own emotions.

Emotional Fitness

Exercise 41 – Cool Your Heels

A chargey, impulsive horse that pushes into your hands, and “requires” checking with the reins, or even subtle pressure to stay connected, is not an emotionally fit horse. If this becomes the norm, their emotions are likely to spiral out of control to a level where they have real trouble maintaining composure especially surrounding and during the intensity of competition. *Cool Your Heels* is a method for allowing it to become **your horse’s choice** to move in a more relaxed fashion while taking responsibility for their emotions as well as maintaining gait. You’re essentially taking the excess energy and channeling it in a way that causes your horse to make a different decision. The consequence is loping a very small, energetic circle (hard work), and the reward is the option to lope relaxed on a bigger (easier) circle.



When your horse tends to gain speed at a lope on a loose rein, wind down into a very small circle while maintaining a lope. Don’t concern yourself so much with *how* your horse is traveling. Avoid the temptation to ask him to shape his body. Use the reins as little as possible, primarily for blocking extreme excess forward motion, and only if necessary. As you’re loping and winding down into a smaller circle, don’t drive hard with your legs, but instead get animated in your upper body to match the horse’s energy and then some. After a while, it’s likely that your horse will realize he isn’t so interested in keeping up with all that hard work, and he’ll relax or slow down a bit. Keep it up until you feel the slightest sign of that happening, then broaden the circle. Keep gradually making it bigger and bigger. If the racey impulsiveness comes back, wind down into a brisk small circle until you again feel your horse change his mind again and rate his speed. Be mindful as you perform this exercise, that your timing is important to make it clear where the consequence and the reward is. Consistency is equally as important – don’t tolerate a racey lope one day, and not the next.

Exercise 42 – Lengthen & Shorten



In the same way that a small arena “shortens” horses, many larger, outdoor arenas, which feel less enclosed, have a lengthening effect. Surprisingly, a ride or two spent in the great outdoors during the week can be a great way to prepare a “short” horse to run in a small, indoor pen on the weekend. The same type of activity can put more pep in the step of a more laid back horse to prepare him for a big outdoor run. Keep this in mind, when making a transition between running indoors and outdoors. Use exercises to either lengthen your horse in preparation for a small, indoor pen, and focus on shortening (small circles, etc.) when preparing for a run in a large pen.

Exercise 43 – Move It, Move It!

Attempting to hold back or force a genuinely insecure horse to keep his feet still often creates even more emotional insecurity. This may be necessary at times for safety reasons, but in the long run doesn't address this problem at its source. We have to change *the reason* a horse doesn't want to stand still.

One way to go about this is to actually encourage an insecure horse to move his feet, but *in a way* and direction you dictate, then reward him for doing so which helps release built up adrenalin, causes him to *want* to stand still or move in the specific way you request.



In the moments when your horse has an overwhelming desire to move his feet, without any emotions attached, say "OK, let's go – be my guest!" Give them as much room, line and rein as safely possible while making dynamic figure eights at a trot with the circles being approximately 10 – 15 feet in diameter. In this exercise, *do* pay some attention to the quality in which your horse moves. Get specific about the lateral bend in the rib cage, but be persistent versus forceful when it comes to requiring quality movement. Be sure to let the rein slide through your hands when they volunteer to lower their head. If your horse responds well right away, there's no need to keep circling – get the relaxation, go straight for a while, then bend in the other direction, or allow a rest reward.

It may take longer than you expect initially, but keep up this dynamic movement until you feel a subtle positive change. The more distracted your horse is, the more variance in direction and gait you should add to the figure eights. Keep in mind that the more "go" your horse has, the more you'll benefit from smaller circles and a more extreme full-body bend. How firm and direct you are vs. soft, gentle and reassuring will depend on your horse's individual needs. You want to offer clear guidance and leadership but not cause your horse to be fearful or even more insecure.

Exercise 44 – Long & Low

The barrel horse version of "Long & Low" is a valuable moving stretch to help counter act the negative effects of moving with inverted or tense posture. If your horse is already paying close attention to your body language and following your focus, energy and shifts in weight, then it won't take long when you soften your eyes, focus far into the distance, and with even, forward energy, relax and round your own back, and apply "hugging legs," for your horse to be motivated to find this similar position.

As you "lengthen and lower" in your own body, encourage your horse to lower his head. Lighten the weight in your seat to almost hover while activating your lower body in a way that encourages your horse's hind legs to reach and back to lift.



Exercise 45 – Find Your Feet

Many horses today don't receive the benefits of having grown up in rugged terrain that requires them to really learn where their feet are. In addition, even more horses have not had *humans* take the time to positively convince them that turning over control of their feet is such a good idea. This is something we have to step in and help them with, especially with horses who have a particularly high self-preservation instinct. When it comes to understanding how to build emotional fitness, it's important to understand that a horse's survival mechanism is their feet – *and* their ability



to use them to flee in an instant & protect or defend themselves. If you've ever noticed a horse get nervous on muddy or uneven ground, or if you've ever noticed your horse stutter-step and get anxious and tense when stepping in and out of the trailer, you may be able to see the connection between compromised foot placement and their insecurity.

A big part of building our horse's confidence is a matter of helping them become very comfortable with placing their feet very precisely under all circumstances. Preparing a horse to run barrels requires much more than running barrels. As I have mentioned, when we have a problem on the barrel pattern, there are always symptoms of the same problem that exist elsewhere, that are just less noticeable. Although the *Find Your Feet* exercises are done *away from the pattern*, you'll find that the confidence, trust and comfort you create from **Leading by the Leg**, doing **Gate Work**, and using **Cavaletti** and **Obstacles** will tend to also show up in a run when you need it most.

"With an increase in speed comes an increase in emotions, which often leads to tension and anxiety, hesitation or resistance. If we don't build a solid foundation in this area and bring our horses back to center in between runs, it will lead to break down on all levels. Emotional issues are the root cause for major roadblocks standing in the way of quality movement (and eventually soundness), not only because of the tension and brace it contributes to in the horse's body, but any time our horse pushes against pressure, even subtly, it's a sign that his idea and our idea are not lining up – that he would rather be somewhere else and isn't content to stay between our reins and legs. It's not necessarily because he doesn't know he should stay between our reins and legs, but that he doesn't want to.

When it comes to recognizing the forms of an emotional imbalance, of course there are the more obvious symptoms such as tension, nervousness, distraction, stiffness, resistance, or a short, choppy stride. On the other end, which is less common but equally frustrating is the "lazy" barrel horse – they are usually willing to do what we ask, but are "energy conservationists" who are exceptionally good at making everything less work for themselves, and more for the rider. These horses may even be more challenging because most people appreciate a barrel horse that is actually calm and laid back for a change, however they tend to lack the motivation necessary for quality, forward movement. If you think about it, this is really an emotional issue as well. A horse's lack of desire is based on how he feels. When we address this issue at the core, it no longer requires us to force a "lazy" horse to move with quality or else, but with a firm educational plus emotional foundation, we can cause them to actually want to put effort forth – and there's a big difference! Education, physical development, care and nutrition play a part as well. What's most critical is that we do not neglect to understand that how our horse feels is important, AND that we have so much power to influence it." – Heather Smith

A Winning Warm Up

Exercise 46 – Plan Your Peak

Questions to Plan Your Peak in Advance

Is my horse usually laid back, or high energy? What must be done in advance to achieve balance?
What have been our problem areas in the past? What things can I do in advance to improve?
What kind of environment or set-up am I preparing for, what special considerations do I need to take?
What are my own weak areas in competition? What steps must I take to prepare physically and mentally?

Questions for the Day of Competition

What circumstances could be effecting how my horse feels today?
(Ex: Separation from other horses, weather, feed changes, soreness, etc.)

How can I plan the timing in which my horse eats his hay or grain to support his performance?

How did he feel the last time we competed? How are things different/the same today? What about myself?

If we are not feeling our best, is there anything that can be done to improve how we feel now?

Is there a chance my horse could be sore due to frequent runs, a long haul, a slip or injury, etc.?

What can I do today to ease stress, and improve mental clarity for my horse and I to be at our best?

"Don't allow what works for others impact what works for you & your horse. Proof is in the performance – learn from each one!"

Questions & Considerations Based on the Conditions

Am I running in a small pen or a large one? Indoor or outdoor?

Do I need to "shorten or lengthen" my horse in the warm up?

Based on my horse's tendencies, and how he feels, and the environment, what must I focus on in the warm up?

What is the arena entrance and alley like? What is the exit like?

How should I position my horse in the alley for a good approach to the first barrel? What are my focal points?

What are the ground conditions like? How does my horse typically handle this ground?

Do I need to ride differently or change any equipment based on the angles, ground conditions or arena set up?

Will there be excessive distractions and noise in the warm up area or holding pen?

Is there anything in the arena that could potentially distract my horse that I should be prepared for?

Questions to Consider for Planning the Warm Up

How often does the producer drag the arena? Approx. how long do the big drags last?

How quickly are the barrel racers going through (figure on 60 per hour at best at open races).

What are my options for locations to warm up? What is the best location for myself and my horse?

Is there anything I must specifically focus on due to a less than ideal warm up environment?

Based on the conditions (weather, ground, arena, my horse, etc.) how long will my warm up need to be?

Final Pre-Run Spot Check

Is my horse calm, connected and responsive?

Is my horse emotionally balanced with equal "whoa & go?"

Is my horse utilizing his hindquarters well?

Does my horse move forward powerfully and with quality?

Will my horse softly flex his neck/poll laterally & vertically?

Is my horse responsive and willing to yield his shoulders, ribs and hips from subtle leg pressure?

When asked to counter arc does my horse respond quickly and with good posture?



Exercise 47 – Flip the Script

Your exercise here again is *a mental one*, requiring you to repeat the phrases below, or ones like them, not in a superficial way, but by first getting very present and *feeling* these words deep within and embodying them. This isn't about just mindlessly repeating them over and over, it's about taking language like this and using it in your own way to replace anything resembling negativity, judgment and fear in your mental vocabulary to completely change the conversation – *to flip the script*, so that in time it becomes more than an exercise, but *a way of life*.

"I am prepared and flexible and can adapt to any change or challenge."

"I may not be where I want to be yet, but I celebrate the opportunity to do what I love and follow my dreams."

"There is no comparing my journey with anyone else's. My horses and I have unique talents, knowledge and skills."

"I was born to do this. My dreams are worth fighting for. I put *my all* into making *my very best* run."

"I take responsibility for every performance and am grateful for the opportunity to compete."

"We focus like a laser. We run and rate and turn with power, strength, quickness, agility and athleticism."

"Despite what cannot change about competition, I always choose a positive attitude and perspective."

"I am immune to distractions and unaffected by what's around me. I keep my eyes on my own paper."

"We set the standard. We command our very best. We shatter arena records. We claim our success."

"I am in control of my thoughts, and I chose to focus on myself, my horse and our performance."

"I have done my best to prepare and will turn over the results to a power greater than myself."

"I look forward to learning from each run, and know they will continue getting even better."

"My environment does not affect me, I radiate with powerful, positive confidence."

"Other people have nothing to do with my run or how I prepare for it."

"I make my own run. I stay in touch with what's deep inside, I act on instinct."

"Step it up, jockey in the driver's seat! Ride every stride. Hustle every step."

"With laser focus and tunnel vision, I am in control, I am IN THE ZONE."

"I am worthy and valuable regardless of the results of my performance."

"Everything is progress. Every single run is an opportunity to improve."

"I block out everything except positive, confidence-enhancing self-talk."

"I choose to stand straight, ride tall & exude confidence in competition."

"I compete with the clock. My goal is to be better than I was yesterday."

"I have supreme confidence in my abilities, yet am humble & grateful."

"My results in competition, good or bad, do not determine my worth."

"Everyone makes mistakes. Sometimes I fail, but I always keep trying."

"I am on equal ground with others, we all have a right to compete."

"Aggressive, assertive, explosive... Intense, intimidating, inspiring!"

"Dialed in, focused, balanced, square, quick, fluid, efficient, energetic."

"I am prepared, focused and ready to compete to the best of my ability."

"I will trust my horse, trust our training, and trust our preparation."

"Diamonds are formed under pressure. I excel & shine under pressure."

"It's never over – I'm always strategizing for a better result."

"I am strong, I am IN it to WIN it! I have an attitude of victory!"

"I jockey and lead with quickness, agility and speed."

"My best is *always* enough."

"If you change the way you think, it changes the way you feel, which changes the way you act, what you do, and ultimately, your results."



Exercise 48 - Come Back to Me

A quick, easy and simple way to reconnect with your horse mentally in the warm up pen is with quality lateral flexion. Lateral flexion through the neck and entire body can be done at a standstill or on the move. It can be repeated as much as necessary until you notice a positive change, at which time you would reward the horse in some way. As long as you're purposeful about how and when you do it, asking your horse for lateral flexion can help disarm their "flight response" and is a great way to remind your horse, "I'm here, stay with me." The bend that we ask for counteracts vertical tension by asking the outside of the neck to stretch and the inside to soften. Keep in mind that it's ideal for the plane of the horse's face to be vertical to support balance through the body.



Keep asking for quality bend until your horse shows a sign of relaxation such as blowing out, licking their lips, working their mouth, a big sigh, lowering their head, etc. You can ask for this bend on a small circle, a large one, at a walk or a lope as well. You might ask for bend in the neck, ribs, or through the whole body, in a circle or on a straight line. The objective is to ask for bend in the way that's most appropriate, based on your horse and what is possible in the environment.

Exercise 49 - Get Engaged

A defensive or reactive horse will tend to widen their hind legs to create a sturdier, balanced base of support. This "preparation for takeoff," stance and all the emotions and behaviors that come with it, is something horses do in the name of survival. In the process, a horse can become so reactive that he ignores the rider and becomes uncontrollable. The hindquarter yield or disengagement is something that is often taught as a safety brake to regain control. It's used for this purpose because it is by tipping the horse's nose in lateral flexion, then yielding the hindquarters away, that essentially the horse's power is taken away. But, when used properly it holds so much more value.



There is believed to be a chemical change or a "switching over" from one side of the brain to the other stimulated when the horse's legs cross over each other. The act of disengaging then, has the power to help a horse be pulled back from over the right brain edge, into a more focused, thinking, calm mental state. In other words, *physical* disengagement helps create *mental* engagement.

When a horse gets tense, anxious or nervous, or distracted, the degree of disengagement you ask for, and how long, depends on how severe the symptoms are. As you execute this, *match your horse's energy without matching his emotions*. There is great power in performing even subtle micro-disengages at any gait when your horse gets nervous, or even without forward motion. As long as you do so purposefully, it will remain a powerful tool for restoring mental and emotional balance and connection, enabling you both to focus on what's most important - making a winning run!

Exercise 50 – Laser Beam

There are few places that pose as many distractions as the warm up pen. The pressure of competing, the sights and sounds of other competitors, nervous horses and the high energy is enough to rattle anyone who's normally rock solid under pressure. Not only do we need to "flip the script" and play positive, confidence building mental tapes as we prepare, in those last moments leading up to our run, it's actually most beneficial to stop "playing tapes" entirely.



Transitioning to a quiet mental state, and staying there, doesn't mean zoning out. The type of mental clarity I'm describing actually consists of a heightened awareness of your surroundings, but sensitivity to *only what matters*, such as how your horse feels underneath you in each moment, while enabling you to drown out everything else. We don't necessarily "stop thinking" but rather quiet the inner monologue of repetitive chatter in our minds. By achieving this concentrated state of mind, we are able to bring our conscious thought under control in addition to our emotions. In this state the mind is very much perceptive and aware, just not consumed in thought. Use the visualization exercise below, or your own version of one like it to get focused before each run.

Start by visualizing the interior of a beautiful fairytale-like tree house in a magical forest. The room is rustic, yet sparkling clean and quiet with only one window of bright light shining through. It's a peaceful, pristine place of complete solitude. When you look out the window, you have a view of the first barrel from your horse's back! Like a shockingly realistic movie, you feel yourself trotting down the alley, positioning your horse, then blasting off! As you approach the first barrel your physical senses are heightened as you are able to feel and respond to every little move your horse makes with perfectly impeccable timing. This magical treehouse blocks out anything that does not relate to your run and emphasizes everything that does – creating perfect tunnel vision that allows your mind and body to work in complete unity with your horse. The forest where this room is found is not actually a place you travel to, but one that travels with you. In fact, it exists at all times in your imagination, like one you can open in a pop-up book – a place you can go to as quickly as you can unfold a piece of paper from your pocket at any moment.

Exercise 51 – A Summary

As the final exercise, I'd like you to do something simple right this very moment. Take your dominant pointer finger and point it at your chest. Tap just below your collar bone three times. THERE! Do you *feel* it? Right *there* is everything you need to achieve your barrel racing dreams.

This book is a tool, and you'll employ other tools as you go along. But *everything you need to develop a winner, you already have*. It's not so much found on the outside as it is on the inside. The missing link, the secret to success isn't "out there," it's within – and *I'm honored to help you reveal it!*

Heather Smith

